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Introduction: Turning Pages

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Pages, essays, and books pile up in libraries while pixilated words and paragraphs get packed away on hard disks or float in clouds: permanence versus ephemera. Yet, as underfunded libraries turn into media centers and as digital backup options proliferate, who can tell what pages will last and for how long. These essays have long been stored in volumes of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* (*NEJPP*) or made available on the journal's website. This collection sets them in a fresh context and gives them an opportunity to reach new readers in a format that shows how issues and themes change but never disappear.

In thirty years, between 1986 and 2015, I wrote twenty-one essays, reflections on books and topics of public concern for *NEJPP*. I was pleased when the journal editor, Padraig O'Malley, invited me to collect a selection of these essays for this special issue of *NEJPP*, allowing me the opportunity and the space once again to explore some crucial issues of the day (war, AIDS, homelessness, the environment) and to reflect on significant places (symbolic cities: Boston, New York, Dublin). Two essays discuss another matter of personal and public concern: Irish American culture through its representative men. I have chosen to include twelve essays here, omitting some that now seem dated in the books discussed.

It has been a tense task, rereading essays I wrote some decades ago, but in the end satisfying, for they remind me of the times, tempers, and cultural contexts in which they were composed and they have things to say that I had forgotten I said. My hope is that these essays, granted a second time around, will have worthy things to say to current readers.

Special Issues and Topics

Two Nations: The Homeless in a Divided Land

Climate: A Period of Consequence; Environmental Literature of 2006

Introducing the *Special Issue on AIDS* in 1988, Padraig O'Malley, journal editor, notes, "On occasion, the *New England Journal of Public Policy*

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will devote an entire issue to consideration of a public policy matter of major importance." Three more special issues followed: *Homelessness* in 1992, *War* in 2003 and 2005, and *Climate, Water, and Oil* in 2007. To each of these issues I was invited to contribute an essay that set the important public policy matter in literary, cultural, and historical contexts. (I have not here included "The Big One: Literature Discovers AIDS" because in the quarter century since it was published, the impact of AIDS and its treatment have been better understood than the writers who first responded to it could have imagined. "Wars Remembered" is paired with another essay in the section on war.) The public crises of homelessness and the endangered environment led me to read writings ranging from polemics to poems in which writers registered their outrage and offered their remedies. Both issues outreach our capacities to fully imagine them and our abilities to deal with them.

Public intellectuals' responses to the crises of persistent homelessness and environmental deterioration have been characterized by several rhetorical designs that attempt to encompass and clarify these threats. Fresh metaphors and original narrative strategies are employed to make vivid these clear and present dangers. Animals and plants are "on the run," migrating to colder climes to survive, Jim Hansen writes in "The Threat to the Planet" (2006); as many as 50 percent face extinction. In *Rachel and Her Children* (1988), Jonathan Kozol notes, "the homeless are found in subway tunnels, on street hot-air grates, in transit stations, *everywhere*." As crises intensify, so too does the rhetoric of those who bear the bad news to public consciousness.

Writers on both topics have long sensed a lost Eden behind our two-nation society and our diseased environment. The naturalists who reported on the urban poor and homeless of the late nineteenth century—Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser—saw them through detached, spectatorial eyes. They raised public awareness through their reportage and their fiction in the shape of parables, but they neither offered nor petitioned for remedies. Riis saw New York City filling with immigrants who were destroying the city's pastoral innocence, and Dreiser, who praised Herbert Spencer's laissez-faire economic Darwinism, insisted "it is only the unfit who fail." Alluding to Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* (1951), that eloquent warning about environmental poisoning, Elizabeth Kolbert, in "The Darkening Sea" (2006), notes that "ocean acidification" is resulting in the probable extinction of coral reefs and more than a million distinct species of sea life. Ralph Waldo Emerson's vision of serene and redemptive nature in his "Divinity School Address" (1838) has been lost: his "refulgent summer" in which "the grass grows,

the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of the flowers. . . . The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily." We all now live unhappily, well east of Eden.

Despite their ample, admirable, and intense reports, not much has changed since my essays on these threats were written. The homeless still wander among us and the icecaps are still melting apace. The rhetorical strategy of the jeremiad—lay sermons that warn of damnation unless the congregation/citizenry repents and reforms by addressing their sins—is still registered by those who write to persuade their readers to do something to meet the threats posed by homelessness and environmental destruction, with desperation but waning conviction. Bill McKibbon in *The End of Nature* (1988) wonders whether it may be "too late to do anything about it all," though he holds out hope, as does Al Gore in *Earth in the Balance* (1992) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Lynn Sharon Schwartz, writing in late 1991, tries to bring the readers of *Harper's Magazine* to empathic and moral awareness of homelessness by reminding us that "either we are our brothers' keepers or we are not."

An era of selfishness and callous indifference toward homeless people and endangered species (though we are one of them) took hold in American politics and culture during the Reagan administration and has only intensified in the nation's polarized and paralyzed political culture of the twenty-first century. As a result, moral outrage may have faded into resigned acceptance, evident in the doomsday notes struck by writers who may have given up hope that their dire reports over these threatening issues will result in public or political action.

The fate of the homeless and the future of the environment are threatened also by economic crises, endless wars, diseases, and drugs and by racism and a range of other prejudices and me-first self-centeredness. America may have lost its covenant of community, first and best articulated by John Winthrop's 1630 vision of a "city upon a hill" where citizens "delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together." Some environmentalists fear we have passed the "tipping point" where our covenant with nature has been sundered. "Are humans a suicidal species?," Alanna Mitchell asks in *Dancing at the Dead Sea* (2004). In *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate* (2006), an eloquent account of habitats in peril, Elizabeth Colbert fears what the future holds for the crowded planet's six billion people. The homeless, marginalized during the Reagan–Bush era—seen as "other," excluded from the American community, victims blamed for their condition—may in the not-so-long run be avatars of the future human condition.

Significant Places

Imagining Boston: The City as Image and Experience

"Imagining Boston" is the first of two *NEJPP* essays that led to book publications. After "Imagining Boston" was published in 1986, Dan Wakefield—journalist, novelist, screenwriter, colleague in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts Boston for two years, and friend—sent the essay to Wendy Strothman, director of Beacon Press, who commissioned the work that became a book: *Imagining Boston: A Literary Landscape* (1990). Dan, an adopted Bostonian from Indianapolis via Manhattan, lived on Beacon Hill, where Beacon Press was also located, so it seemed fitting that my essay on the tradition of imagery and visionary assertions that resonates in Boston's history found its home there.

I too was an adopted Bostonian, more exactly a regular commuter to Boston, where I taught, driving in and out of the city from its western suburbs, where I had come of age and still lived. As a result, the essay connects personal and public experiences—the prose with the passion, as E. M. Forster once put it—as I reflected upon the many ways Boston has been conceived. I saw it first as the City upon a Hill, the foundational image that is the basis for the redemptive myth of Boston, formulated by John Winthrop for the edification of *Arbella* passengers sailing to settle in what they called New England. Winthrop evoked an ideal of community that has distinguished Boston from cities with more worldly self-images, particularly New York City with its sense of itself as go-getter Gotham. But Winthrop's words have also haunted Bostonians with the sense that they were not fulfilling their covenant to be "like a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

Three and a half centuries after Winthrop articulated the goal of Boston's errand into the wilderness, Boston projected a countermyth of racism and violence when the city was torn apart by racial and class conflicts surrounding court-ordered school integration, the so-called busing crisis of the mid-1970s. J. Anthony Lukas's *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (1985) portrays Bostonians' common ground as a killing field of lost purpose. But Lukas also construes the community-shattering experience—taunts and rocks thrown at school buses, accompanied by police motorcyclists, being driven from students' neighborhoods in black Roxbury to schools in white, Irish South Boston—into a redemptive vision of what Boston could and should become, a myth of expectation, ever short of realization, held out to the city's first settlers by Winthrop.

Boston, that most self-conscious and literary of American cities, offered itself and others who looked upon its many other images, consistent with its increasing self-assurance: the Athens of America, the Hub of the Solar System, and most recently, Red Sox Nation—images that radiate the city's influence and subsume Greater Bostonians into a coherent community. This vision is belied by its history of disputations, for this City of Neighborhoods has also been a place of warring tribes. This essay examines the many ways Boston, seen in its widest territorial and cultural reach, has been imagined by its writers since Anne Bradstreet wrote that her "heart rose" in 1630 on first seeing the unpromising landscape, the harsh and hilly Shawmut peninsula, and Robert Lowell wrote in "For the Union Dead" in 1960 that his heart sickened at the loss of purpose that persuaded Bostonians to rip open the Boston Common to build an underground garage in the middle of the twentieth century.

New York Revisited

When I reread "New York Revisited" for the first time in twenty-three years, I was staying in Manhattan, in my friends' apartment overlooking the Reservoir. During our brief stay, my wife and I saw *An American in Paris,* a glorious stage translation of the 1951 film, at the Palace in Times Square. Later we took the subway downtown to tour the new Whitney Museum, an architectural and cultural triumph located in the meatpacking district, adjacent to one end of the High Line, the 1.45-mile-long linear park and aerial greenway built on an elevated section of a disused railroad spur that stretches from 14th to 34th Street. We moved through the Whitney, viewing some six hundred works collected over the past century in an exhibit titled "America Is Hard to See"; yet, from the Whitney's jutting balconies, all of Manhattan, the vast harbor, and the mighty Hudson River were vividly before and beyond us. Strolling the High Line's elevated bowers of rich plantings, I felt I was walking on air. Walt Whitman's words from "City of Orgies" came to mind: "City of my walks and joys!"

The morning after this heady, elevating experience, however, rereading "New York Revisited" brought me back to earth. It was written when the city was in a slough of despond. In October 1975, President Gerald Ford, rejecting the city's plea for financial assistance, was inaccurately reported by the *Daily News* to have told New York City to "Drop Dead!" In the fall of 1990 *Time* magazine ran a similarly dour headline: "The Rotting of the Big Apple." Media outlets competed to deliver the city's death notices in continuous loops of deranged urban

images: drugs, disease, rape, racism, economic inequities, and other forms of civic unrest—Gotham had it all! The city seemed on the brink of nada: a disintegrating entity, a depleted idea, a diminished thing; even the film *Batman Returns* (1992) portrayed the city as a dystopian horror. A consensus confirmed that Sodom on the Hudson was another country, separate from what Vice President Dan Quayle during the 1992 election called "the rest of America."

In "New York Revisited" I set out to weigh and qualify this apocalyptic vision. I was swayed by what Henry James called "the imagination of disaster," the urban nightmare set forth not only by a peeved president and sensationalist news outlets but also by many thoughtful novelists, poets, and journalists. I accepted—too rashly I now see, underestimating the city's resilience, evident even during its worst days to come, on and after 9/11—the theory of the city's decline and fall as the center of civilization and culture. But I still insisted in this essay that the city remained vibrant, open anew for the inscription of significations. New York City still stood as a restorative emblem for the state of the nation.

I read a dozen or more books for this project and to pursue a passion I have held for the city since I, a young man from the New England provinces, went there to hear jazz in the 1950s. I read urban analysts, poets, local historians, novelists, memoirists, reporters, whomever I could find that addressed the state of New York City and its symbolic implications for the state of the nation. I went back to the city's first historian, Washington Irving, who wrote *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* in 1809, when the city had little history to write about; I celebrated Walt Whitman's unshakable celebration of the city—"This is the city and I am one of the citizens."—and praised the poets who in 1992 honored Whitman a century after his death in public readings at the Cathedral of Saint John. After all my readings and after all my pilgrimages to this American city of lights, I could not decide whether New York City was once lost or now found, so I extended my reflections into my second book for Beacon Press: *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York: A Literary History* (1995); its title, taken from a phrase by Henry James, caught my own ambivalence and that of three centuries of writers on the city.

I felt no such ambivalence about the city, however, on that visit in 2015 when I reread and rethought this 1992 essay. After being buoyed by *An American in Paris*, a musical shaped around the songs and dances of the city's finest composers, George and Ira Gershwin; after visiting the Whitney, that diamond as big as the Ritz; after walking along the High

Line, some twenty to thirty feet above lower Manhattan traffic, but feeling like a stroller through an English garden. After all that I was in no mood for ambivalence, so we left our friends' Upper West Side apartment and, in the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon, as Henry James once put it, we walked into the city's jewel in the crown, Central Park, and circled the Reservoir. Framed by greenery and vaunting towers, we felt we were at the center of the world.

Important Places

"Important Places" is an occasional essay, written in 2005 as a speech in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the English Department of the University of Massachusetts Boston. I delivered the talk before an audience of faculty, students, alumni, and their families in a large meeting room in the new Campus Center on the Columbia Point peninsula, at a podium before a windowed wall looking out on Boston Harbor and a panorama of the city shining in the autumn afternoon's slanted light. We all, department and university, had come far from our origins in rented buildings, located in the then scruffy Park Square at the center of the city. We looked at ourselves and at our surroundings with wonder at all that had transpired and had been transformed in forty years. The talk focused on the sense of place, on how place is constructed in our imaginations as momentary stays against confusion, which is what Robert Frost said of poetry. So, while the talk was both occasional and parochial, the writers I discussed projected their visions of place with wide implications.

Three significant places, three cities, have drawn me to explore, to imagine, and to trace in literature: Boston, John Winthrop's "city upon a hill"; New York City, Walt Whitman's "city of orgies"; and James Joyce's "dear dirty Dublin." For me and for many of those I read, these were not mere cities but also emblems of nationhood: Boston's claims to moral purpose, New York City's openness to seekers of the American dream, and Dublin's embodiment of Ireland's cultural divisions and achievements. But before I saw any of them there was a coming-of-age of sorts in a small town thirty miles west of Boston and universes away from New York and Dublin. So I drew selectively on personal experience here as elsewhere in these essays to register the camera eye and perspective angle from which these symbolic sites and these books have been read. In *The Liberal Imagination* Lionel Trilling notes that "it is the fate of The Young Man [from the Provinces] to move from an obscure position into one of considerable eminence in Paris or London."[1] My own move was far more constricted and less consequential, but my personal and literary travels from Boston to New York to Dublin and beyond became my

journey of understanding of these places and those who imagined them. Rereading this essay made me appreciate all in our lives and in our significant places that has passed, is passing and it stirred wonder at what is yet to be.

Boston and New York: The City Upon a Hill and Gotham

After writing books on the ways Boston and New York City have been imagined by writers over three centuries, I turned my thoughts to the many ways each of these cities has imagined the other—America's Athens and Sparta—for each has been hyperconscious of its significant other as a competitor, a model of aspiration, and a source of condemnation. Each has needed the other to define itself. If Boston claimed the high ground of the nation's city upon a hill, New York insisted it was a city of limitless opportunity for the huddled masses from abroad and for restless young men and women from the American provinces.

I worked this material up into a course I then offered for undergraduates and graduate students at University of Massachusetts Boston. My students—many of whom were keen observers of the long-standing Yankees–Red Sox rivalry—took to the idea of comparing these cities and, with their help, increased my understanding of actual and imagined places. My next step was to write up my reflections for the *NEJPP*.

Now, ten years after composing this essay, I am conscious of how much has changed. In 2005 New York City was still recovering from the shock of 9-11; but by 2015 the soaring Freedom Tower, along with memorial reflecting pools at the original World Trade Center building sites, has risen at ground zero and the September 11 Museum and Memorial has opened. In the 2005 essay I noted that New York City's sense of itself had been shaken by the devastating events of 9-11. Boston suffered no similar urban trauma until April 15, 2013, when two terrorists exploded bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, shattering this celebratory annual event and breaking Boston's heart. But Bostonians' immediate response to these explosions was the same as New Yorkers' response to 9-11: both communities joined to assist the wounded and affirm their pride in their cities. After 9-11 it was repeatedly said, "We are all now New Yorkers." After 4-15 "Boston Strong" was declared and blazoned on Greater Bostonians' tee-shirts and banners. Under siege, both cities stood tall and stood together.

In lesser ways notable things changed in this decade. Gus, the beloved polar bear who compulsively swam laps in his Central Park Zoo pool, died

and was replaced by Betty and Veronica, two grizzlies imported from the Bronx Zoo for the delight of Manhattan residents. James Levine, plagued by poor health, had to give up his unifying role as conductor of both the Boston Symphony and New York City's Metropolitan Opera, where he still conducts, though now from his wheelchair. Boston began to imitate Manhattan in erecting tall buildings and both cities developed their waterfront into splendid parks. But the Red Sox and Yankees still compete, though the Red Sox have won three World Series championships in the twenty-first century, while the formerly invincible Yankees have won none. The more things change, the more they stay the same. This essay evokes and reflects on literary examples of what New York City and Boston have thought of each other over the past three centuries.

War

Touched by Fire: Readings in Time of War

The late fall and holiday season of 1990, when I wrote "Touched by Fire," was a season of dread and convergences, for we all sensed war was coming. "There's a great cloud over the American people this Christmas," the pollster Louis Harris noted. President George H. W. Bush vowed military action to expel the Iraqi occupation forces of Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Kuwait in August. If Hussein's armies were not out by January 15, 1991, "overwhelming and devastating force" would be employed, in the ominous words of Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. A quarter of a century on, it is impossible to reread the inflated, inflamed rhetoric of the first Bush administration—Bush 41 described Hussein as "worse than Hitler"—without thinking of the escalation of military forces and rhetorical overreach—"shock and awe," "weapons of mass destruction"—that accompanied the 2003 invasion of Iraq to remove Hussein during the administration of Bush 43, George W., whose most forceful spokesperson for fanciful prognostication was Vice President Cheney. So, before it became the opening act in our seemingly endless Middle East war productions, the brief but consequential 1991 engagement in Kuwait was a war of words before it became a war in fact. The Berlin Wall came down that year and the Cold War gave way to hot wars over territorial, ethnic, and ideological claims. Inevitably the books I read that fall reminded me of earlier wars and of the presidents who presided over them. Everything I read suggested wars of words, aggressions by analogy, rhetorical rationalizations, and overreach.

Old presidents were still around to add their two cents and their equally valuable support to Bush 41. Ronald Reagan published a memoir,

An American Life (1990), in which he and his ghost writers construed that life into a romantic idyll and a redemptive parable, ignoring all qualifying evidence, justified by Reagan's faith that "God had a plan for me" and for his nation. So, while storm clouds gathered across the sea, it was always "morning in America" for the Gipper, though Bush 41 had portrayed America "as a prison," in the words of Sidney Blumenthal, during the 1988 presidential campaign. Before the battle for Kuwait, Richard Nixon, in Orwellian doublethink, predicted that this would be a "war about peace—not just peace in our time, but peace for our children and grandchildren in the years ahead." We now know that the years ahead would call on many of those children and grandchildren to fight and die in wars started by and pursued by the administrations of Bushes 41 and 43.

During a television interview, Bush 41, standing before a painting by George P. A. Healy of Lincoln and his generals titled "The Peacemakers," said he had not yet been "tested by fire." I thought of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said he and his brothers in arms had been "touched by fire" during the Civil War. Ken Burns's magisterial eleven-hour documentary *The Civil War* played on PBS that fall, giving historical resonance to our anxieties about upcoming blood sacrifice over Middle East oil potentates. The words of some Civil War soon-to-be dead soldiers and battle-traumatized survivors mixed in my mind with nightly news forecasts of upcoming slaughters. When Major General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain accepted the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, he witnessed the defeated Confederate soldiers marching by "as if it were the passing of the dead." The Union soldier Sullivan Ballou, before his death at Bull Run, wrote to his beloved Sarah to say he was "perfectly willing" to die for his country, to sustain "American Civilization." The Bush administrations claimed similar high purpose—think of Bush 43's "Mission Accomplished" banner and photo-shoot aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, May 1, 2003—but by 2015 all their empty claims for righteous wars tasted of ashes.

Wars Remembered

I never went to war, but war has been on my mind all my life. I came to consciousness during World War II, the reputed "Good War"; I saw my slightly older friends drafted to fight and get wounded or die in Korea, that forgotten war; in the late 1950s I served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force at a Strategic Air Command base in Georgia, where planes carrying nuclear bombs flew in and out, night and day; in Boston I protested against the Vietnam War and the Bush administration's Middle East wars.

But I was either too young or too old when hot wars enlisted American young men to serve. My father, born in the first years of the twentieth century, was not so fortunate, for he had to face the full force of the Great Depression, the death of his young wife, the transfer of his son to the care of his sister, and, after enlisting in 1940, the horrific military engagements of the South Pacific during World War II, which did him in. As a result I draw on his experience, or my perception of it, as a personal point of focus for this essay on war.

Rereading "Wars Remembered" a dozen years after it was written, I am struck by the painful eloquence of the writers who reflect memorably on wars they have seen. Henry James on the Great War: "the plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness." Philip Larkin on the Great War: "Never such innocence again." Samuel Hynes, a World War II veteran: "a young man goes to war because it is there to go to." Martha Gelhorn in shock at Dachau on the day Germany surrendered: "my lifelong point of no return." In war young men and women confront the absurd—a post-modern nightmare of dislocation and fragmentation from which they never wholly awake—but some who survive attempt to shape "fitting emblems of adversity," as W. B. Yeats put it, reflecting on Ireland's war for independence from England while England fought against Germany during the Great War.

Each of these writers was transformed by the experience of war; each became older, wiser, more jaded, more ironic, more eloquent. "War is an exciting elixir," Chris Hedges, a war reporter, notes, and for all of its trauma and chaos, war "is a force that gives us meaning." Those meanings are many, varied, and at times contradictory, but it remains, as I here argue, a painful process of initiation and enlightenment, a motivation for reflection and an inspiration for journalism, memoirs, fiction, and poetry.

Imaging Ireland and Irish American

Good-bye to All That: The Rise and Demise of Irish America

Tip O'Neill: Irish American Representative Man

Home and Away: Imagining Ireland Imagining America

Revised Emblems of Erin in Novels by John McGahern and Colum McCann

"Good-bye to All That" and "Tip O'Neill," written around the turn into the twenty-first century, reflect my interest in Irish American culture and my own belatedly discovered ethnic identity. I did not grow up in an Irish American neighborhood, or parish; I went to Catholic school only on

Sundays while attending my town's public grammar school during the week; I never heard Irish music, saw step dancers, or read Irish poetry as a boy. My interests then were predictably parochial, narrowly ranging from Bibbie's Pool Room to the soda shop across the street where girls congregated. I was reared by my father's sister, Jane, whose parents came from Country Cork, and her husband, Cliff, an exemplary man of Yankee stock whose father fought for the Union in the Civil War. We lived in his family house and grounds, which had been farmland until the shoe factories drew young men like Cliff away. Aunt Jane did have a painting hanging on the living room wall that depicted, as I imagined it, a romantic vision of Ireland, where she never went, and she kept a framed photo of Cardinal William O'Connell on a living-room side table, affirming her Catholic allegiance, though she married a Protestant and seldom attended mass. Her assertions of ethnic and religious identity were automatic, unthinking, but my own youthful affinities for things Irish did not extend beyond rooting for football teams from Notre Dame, "the Fighting Irish." Indeed sentimental pictures, Irish tenors like Dennis Day on *The Jack Benny Show*, and Catholic instruction from Sunday School nuns or retreat priests' sermons put me off Irishness of any kind. The fiction of James Joyce and the poetry of William Butler Yeats I read in college portrayed an Ireland of troubles and lyricism, but I was taught that they were universal, not national writers. It took Jack Kennedy, first as my U.S. senator, then as president, to awaken my latent ethnic identity. His poise, grace, and wit redefined what it meant to be an Irish American, and his presence influenced a number of works that defined Irish American history and culture, starting with William Shannon's *The American Irish*, a book that was published in November 1963, just when Kennedy was assassinated. (He promised Shannon he would read it when he returned from Dallas.) Suddenly the meaning of Irish American identity shifted from great expectations to a sense of abiding loss. Future U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan saw the Kennedy presidency as the "last hurrah" of Irish American politics. Irish American scholarship and literature looked back in wonder at what Lawrence J. McCaffrey would suggest was the Irish immigrants' "journey from somewhere to nowhere." As I began to gain a sense that the person I am was shaped by my family's home place, and as I began my own travels to Ireland, the cultural cohesions of the Irish American community began to fragment under the pressures of secularism, educational, and professional opportunities, questions about the Catholic Church's teachings and doubts about its priests' claims to moral sovereignty.

Irish Americans have come a long way since the majority of their ancestors arrived in great numbers in the United States more than a century and a half ago. Irish American identity was first claimed by Scotch Irish settlers before the American Revolution, then ascribed pejoratively (Micks, Paddys, Muckers) to the post-Famine immigrants who transformed our cities. These strangers in a strange land affirmed their U.S. citizenship by fighting in its wars and shaking off remnants of their ancestors' culture. But as this nation has become increasingly multicultural, Irish identity has become increasingly problematic—an elective affinity as any Saint Patrick's Day parade illustrates.

Jack Kennedy was the product of a three-generation journey from post-Famine Ireland to the U.S. presidency. That said, biographers disagreed over how Irish he was. Nigel Hamilton, in *JFK: Reckless Youth* (1992), praised Kennedy by trying to separate him from what Hamilton saw as his dysfunctional family and his Irish Catholic culture, but Doris Kearns Goodwin, in *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys* (1987), makes it clear that he was a Kennedy first and last, a young man shaped by his mother's Catholic culture overlaid by prestigious schooling, his father's worldly ways and fierce ambitions for his children. Kennedy's embrace of Irishness came later. When the president visited Ireland in the summer of 1963, he said this at his ancestral home, New Ross, County Wexford:

> I am glad to be here. It took 115 years to make this trip, and 6,000 miles, and three generations. But I am proud to be here and I appreciate the warm welcome you have given to all of us. When my great grandfather left here to become a cooper in East Boston, he carried nothing with him except two things: a strong religious faith and a strong desire for liberty. I am glad to say that all of his great grandchildren have valued that inheritance. If he hadn't left, I would be working over at the Albatross Company, or perhaps for John V. Kelly. In any case, we are happy to be back here.[2]

Kennedy never returned to the land of his grandfathers, but many of those in what came to be called the Irish Diaspora did, renewing their ancestral covenant with Erin and affirming their Irish American identity. For nearly half a century Ireland has been my second home; at times, walking its lanes between wet hedgerows or climbing its holy hills, I feel it is my true spiritual home. Through many crossings of Ireland's four green fields, through ample readings, through many late-night talks with Irish friends and innumerable classes taught, my perspective has been doubled, allowing me to see Ireland and Irish America from both sides

now.

These essays focus on Irish American turf, particularly on what I call its representative men. The term is lifted from Ralph Waldo Emerson's collection of seven lectures, *Representative Men* (1850). His models were heroic figures, moral and intellectual exemplars or conquerors: Plato (philosopher), Swedenborg (mystic), Montaigne (skeptic), Shakespeare (poet), Napoleon (man of the world), Goethe (writer). My representative Irish Americans are less exalted in stature, narrower in their range of concerns and more parochial. ("All politics is local," said one of them: Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, Speaker of the House.) That said, these Greater Bostonians—like those Irish village residents who fought for their "pitchfork-armed claims" over "half a rood of rock" in County Monaghan, commemorated in Patrick Kavanagh's poem "Epic" (1938)—have "lived in important places, times / When great events were decided."

My representative men exemplified aspects of Irish America's history and character: William Cardinal O'Connell, who dominated and defended Greater Boston's Irish Catholics in the first half of the twentieth century; Jack Kennedy, whose presence redefined and released that same community into a wider world of style and substance; and Tip O'Neill, who embodied Irish American political power, locally and nationally. Those who illustrated more ambivalent, perhaps darker sides of the Irish American character include Joseph P. Kennedy, financier and political manipulator; James Michael Curley, legendary mayor of Boston and convicted criminal, whose political ambition and opportunism detracted from his contributions to his constituents: he "did it for a friend," as he explained when convicted of committing illegal favors to gain votes. And Ronald Reagan, who performed the part of the triumphant Irish American, but who abandoned the Democratic Party and repudiated the collectivist, government-centered values of O'Neill and his kind. The Irish American saga has been a long and circuitous journey toward the ever-receding promised land of acceptance, from "Need Not Apply" to the presidency, and respectability through success in public institutions: particularly in the church and government. My grandfather, Timothy, arrived from County Cork just after Ireland's Great Famine. He worked as a railroad hand and tended the furnace in a normal school but he managed to buy a house for his large family and he lived long enough to give me advice that encapsulates the wisdom of his journey from County Cork to Greater Boston and that I have followed in my fifty years of teaching at the University of Massachusetts Boston: "Get a good dry job with the state

and hang on to it." But I will also again go across the seas to Erin and reimagine my grandfather's journey to Amerikay through readings, as I do in my latest essays, "Home and Away" and "Revised Emblems of Erin."

Notes

[1] Lionel Trilling, "The Princess Casamassima," in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 59.
[2] John F. Kennedy, "Remarks of the President at New Ross Quay, New Ross, Ireland," Office of the While House Press Secretary (Dublin, Ireland), June 27, 1963.